

burnt espresso on your tongue

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burnt espresso on your tongue

by [effervescentlies](#)

Summary

There are a lot of things George hates about the new barista, Dream:

1. He sucks at brewing espresso.
2. He's, like, distractingly hot, in the way that makes George want to slam his head into the espresso machine.
3. He's got a thing for using pick-up lines on customers — and George.

The worst part is, the pick-up lines are starting to work. George wants to kiss him.

He hates it.

Notes

thank you to rowan ykithadto happen for organizing this fic exchange! this one's for arti l4undrybear -- she said she liked enemies to lovers and coffee shop AUs, so that's exactly what this is! go check them out :)

[rowan's twitter](#)
[rowan's ao3](#)

[arti's twitter](#)
[arti's ao3](#)

i did a bit of research for this, so for everyone who isn't well-versed in espresso machines, here's the terminology:

tamp - pressing down the ground coffee beans into a puck

portafilter - basically, the thing with the handle used to hold the ground coffee that goes in the espresso machine. where the extracted espresso pours out from

enjoy ^_^

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

For George, working at Common Grounds is, in a word, exhausting. In more ways than one.

Dealing with demanding customers, having to remake their drinks in the midst of a surge of business is one thing; being on his feet all day is another. When George is in the middle of whisking matcha powder for some girl's iced matcha oat milk latte, the last thing he wants to hear is that the customer he'd served earlier thinks *their* matcha latte doesn't have the right ratio of matcha to milk.

There's another way, too: how he'll have to wake up early for opening, and stay all day until it's time for closing. It's something he thought he'd get used to over time — but at this point, it's been months, and George doesn't feel any less physically drained when he presses the curve of his cheek against his living room couch, lets the ache in his shoulders seep into plush cushions.

Still, though. George likes his job — he really does, in the way that hearing the constant grind of coffee beans has become soothing rather than an ear sore, and in the way that he can take out all his anger on tamping a puck of coffee grinds a little harder than he really should.

Well, at least. Until.

It goes a little something like this: with the sprawling heat of summertime comes a new, bustling wave of customers throughout the day. George thought he could handle it alone, working the solo shift. It was what he'd always done; somehow managing to man the cash register, steam milk, and brew three double shots of espresso all at once.

After all three coffees came out tasting bitter, though. That's when George realized he needed extra help.

And so his manager hired someone else, all shiny and brand-new to the incredibly intense world of the food and beverage industry. He's some tall, blond, freckled guy who likes the chocolate chip muffins Common Grounds keeps in their baked goods showcase and smiles too much, too hard at customers when he takes their orders. He always spills a little bit of the coffee grounds on the counter when he's working with the espresso machine, and his apron matches his eyes, making them shine a bit brighter than usual.

His name tag, written in neat liquid chalk marker, reads *DREAM* :) in big, rounded letters. George's name tag says *George* :, and if he thinks too hard about it, he swears Dream is copying him just a bit.

(George decides to scrub off the smiley face at the end of his name one day out of nothing but pure

spite. Dream sees it when they're washing dishes beside each other after closing, and he doesn't comment.)

It's all fine, at first — until Dream and George are both working until closing one fateful Saturday, and the golden light streaming through the café windows hits Dream's cheekbones *just* right, and about a thousand thoughts flick through George's mind so fast that he nearly drops the rag he's using to wipe the counter. Because, Dream's like, really fucking hot.

Hot like the milk jug they use to make that pretty pool of foam at the top of a cappuccino. Hot like the blazing sun burning into the sidewalk outside. Hot as in, George has definitely fucked up a drink or two because he's been too busy looking at the way Dream's hair curls around his ears, like some sort of statue carved from smoothed marble.

George hates him.

"I hate you," he says one day. "Hate."

And Dream just — he just accepts it! Tilts his head, furrows his brows, and goes, "Okay?" all slow and confused, like he doesn't have any idea what George is talking about. He looks cute when he does it, too, and George thinks he wants to slam his head onto the counter.

The worst part is, though: Dream makes shitty coffee. There isn't really even an excuse for that one, if George forgets the fact that Dream was barely hired only a few weeks ago.

"Dream," George says, setting a large-sized americano on the counter, "they're complaining that it's come out tasting burnt."

"Oh." Dream frowns, picks up the hot cup and sets it back down. "I'll remake it."

"*Again*," George says, a little annoyed. "They're saying it's burnt for the second time. Are you, like, brewing it wrong or something?"

"I don't think I am," Dream replies. George ticks up an eyebrow, and he rushes to add, "I mean, I'm not."

George sighs over the sound of the coffee grinder going off again and shakes his head. "Here, let's — let's switch. I'll make it this time."

"Wait, what? No," Dream protests. "I've got it, George."

"Well, you've made the drink twice now and both times it's come out wrong. So," George says fiercely. He moves to grab the portafilter away from the coffee grinder, but Dream pushes him away with his hands. They're too big, and still warm from pouring fresh shots of espresso from cup-to-cup. George's own hand suddenly feels very, very hot.

"I know what I did wrong," Dream insists, pulling the portafilter down. He shakes the fragrant-smelling coffee grounds until they're levelled, sets the portafilter down to press them into a firm puck. "Trust me, George, I've done it before, I've got it."

"You really don't," George says, stealing the coffee tamper away before Dream can pick it up.

Dream snatches the tamper right back, and his fingertips brush against George's palm. He hisses, "I told you, I've got it —"

"You're pressing down too hard — that's why it's coming out burnt —"

“I’ll do it lighter this time!”

George wants to scream. “They’re *staring* at us, you’re making a scene —”

“Are you kidding — you’re the one making a scene!”

And then Dream’s elbow knocks down against the portafilter, and then it’s launching a mound of ground coffee through the air, and then there’s powdered coffee beans all over George’s hair, face, apron. George is frozen, eyes closed with coffee settling atop his eyelashes, mouth open with the texture of dry grounds coating his tongue, and he doesn’t even want to open his eyes to see Dream’s stupidly handsome face right now.

The café goes quiet, and woven between the gentle notes of the music George plays through the speakers, customers murmur and whisper over cups of steaming hot coffee. It’s humiliating.

“Oh my God,” Dream whispers, and George can feel panicky hands awkwardly dusting down the front of his apron. “I am — so sorry.”

George doesn’t say anything. He presses his lips together, tries to ignore the sudden dryness in the back of his throat, and walks off to the bathroom.

Yeah. He hates him.

“He has to go,” George says, setting down a drink for Sapnap — a large iced peach green tea.

Sapnap snorts, swirls around the ice with his straw. “Why, because his face is distracting you in the workplace?”

Weekdays at the café mean less customers trickling in through the doors, so George is able to handle most of the morning coffee rush by himself. In the afternoons, the café is quiet, save for the occasional sounds of keyboards and pens on paper and clinking spoons against ceramic. Sapnap arrives with the gentle *ding* of the bell hung above the front door, settles himself in place by sitting at the bar stools by the counter, and George makes him his regular drink on the house.

“No,” George says, much too quickly. “He sucks at making espresso shots. He spilled coffee grounds everywhere — I was cleaning them out of my shoes for *days*!”

“That was kind of your fault, too,” Sapnap tells him.

George shoots him a venomous look, and Sapnap sets down his to-go cup, pushes it across the counter a little like he’s afraid the drink is poisoned.

“Okay, okay, woah,” Sapnap says. “Calm down. He’s new, cut him some slack.”

“I didn’t spill coffee on my coworkers when I was new.”

Sapnap looks exasperated. “His coffee isn’t going to get any better if you don’t let him practice.”

George narrows his eyes. “Why are you taking his side,” he asks, and when Sapnap shrinks in on himself — it’s subtle, but it’s there — his voice grows louder. “Why are you taking his side?”

Sapnap lies about as smoothly as Dream's coffee goes down, which is to say, not smoothly at all. His voice cracks on the last syllable when he squeaks, "No reason."

George has half the mind to snatch the peach tea out of Sapnap's hands. "*What*. Come on, Sapnap, seriously. Tell me! I'm trustworthy, or — uh, responsible or something."

"You really aren't," Sapnap says, making a pained face; but when George scoffs, he finally relents. Sapnap sighs and takes off his cap to run a hand through his hair. "He's like, friends with Karl. I've seen him around before."

"Oh my God," George says. He wants to dunk Sapnap's drink over his head.

"He's nice, though, and he apologized to you loads of times. It was an *accident*."

George cringes and shakes his head. He drums his fingers on top of the counter, straightens out the tip jar so it's facing forward. The clock above the counter reads that it's nearly time for Sapnap to go, and George takes it as cue to change the subject to something less unbearable. "Does Karl want anything before you go?"

"I would say that he wants coffee, but you've probably got nightmares about using the espresso machine, so. Probably not."

George's mouth drops open. "I do not," he scoffs.

Sapnap laughs and slings his backpack tight over his shoulders. "I'll be back in a few days."

And as the bell jingles when Sapnap opens the door, George calls out, "I make better coffee!"

The next time George sees Dream is early in the morning, in that period between when George rides the bus to work with bleary eyes and when the first customer of the day comes into the café for their morning coffee. The sun is still low and orange in the sky, and the plants hanging by the café's big front window cast tapering shadows on wooden tables and worn leather armchairs.

Dream comes in through the back, feet treading atop the coffee-stained floors. For someone of his height, he's eerily quiet when he walks — and George, with his back turned, doesn't even *notice* he's come in until —

"Hi," Dream says.

George whirls around, and nearly hits his head on the espresso machine in the process. "Oh my God," he gasps, "you scared me."

Dream shifts from side to side, tucks his (warm!) hands into his pants pockets. "Sorry. And, uh, sorry again about spilling the coffee on you. My fault."

George raises his eyebrows and tosses a towel over his shoulder. "It's fine," he manages to say, even though it's very much not fine. He's pretty sure there are still coffee grounds tangled in his messy brown hair. "Just, uh. Just stay at the cash register for today, maybe."

Dream nods, and the cut of his jaw slices against the smattering of freckles on his cheek. His eyes are awkward, darting, and George doesn't miss the flush of pink on the tips of his ears when their

bodies briefly brush to pass by each other. It makes George feel warm down to the pit of his stomach, tingly from the inside out like how he feels after a cup of hot tea.

Okay, well. George hates him, but that doesn't mean that he can't keep thinking that Dream is attractive, because then he'd just be lying to himself.

When the clock hits six in the morning, George unlocks the door and lets the first few customers of the day inside. They comment on the smell, something about the scent of coffee and tea and baked goods seeping into the very foundations of the small café, and George only smiles and nods. He's used to the smell by now; if he comes home after a long shift smelling like espressos and caramel latte, he wouldn't even know.

George is in the middle of pulling a shot of espresso for someone's large iced mocha when he hears a conversation coming from the cash register. He doesn't exactly remember it, and there's bits and pieces missing from when the sound of the coffee grinder drowned everything else out, but he writes the conversation on the back of a drink receipt so he doesn't forget it. It goes a little something like this:

DREAM [BEING STUPID]: Hi there, welcome to Common Grounds! Can I take your order?

CUSTOMER [LOOKING STUPID]: Uh, yeah... can I get a small vanilla iced coffee, but like, not too much vanilla syrup?

DREAM [WHAT THE FUCK]: Of course! [LAUGHS] You're already sweet enough, right?

GEORGE: !?!?

George nearly drops the mocha on the floor at that. When he gets to making the iced coffee, he briefly considers making the coffee with no vanilla syrup at all. He's got a higher dignity than that, though, and passes the sweet-tasting drink over the counter with a forced smile and a "thank you".

As soon as the customer walks out the door, the ice in their cup jostling around:

"What," George starts, whipping around to face Dream, "was that."

Dream blinks. "What was what?"

In the most hideous American accent he can manage, George mocks, "*You're already sweet enough, right?*"

Dream scoffs, a little amused. "I'm trying to make sales. You know, get customers and tips and stuff. Do my job."

"You're like, flirting with the customers!"

"It works," Dream replies, shrugging.

"That can't be allowed."

There's a pause, a beat. Light jazz pours through the café speakers like the thick vanilla syrup dripping over the sides of the bottle, and George watches the Dream's jaw tighten, watches the way the muscles in his shoulders go taut. The sound of light chatter coming from the seating area peeks through, and then:

A slow, slow grin spreads across Dream's face like liquid honey. "You're jealous."

"Are you fucking kidding me," George deadpans. He really wishes the coffee grinder was going off right now, so he wouldn't have to hear Dream's stubbornly attractive voice. "I'm really not."

Dream tilts his head, exasperated. "Come *on*. You totally are, George, just admit it."

"Go away," George scoffs, desperately hoping Dream doesn't see the furious warmth spreading across his cheeks. Everything about Dream seems to make him feel warm. "Fuck off. I hate you."

"Mhm," Dream hums, unconvinced. "I mean, if you really want, I can use my coffee-themed pick-up lines on you."

"I'm serious," George snaps.

"Seriously jealous," Dream retorts, and everything in George feels like it's going to burst.

Dream turns back to the register and pokes around at the tip jar. George turns back to the drink machine and wonders how he's going to survive the rest of this shift.

It's one quiet day at the café; George has his head halfway ducked into the fridge under the counter, when he hears that familiar ringing of a bell he knows all too well.

He shuts the fridge and puts on his best customer service voice, "Hi, welcome to Common Grounds —" and promptly cuts himself off when he sees who's just come in. "Oh. It's you."

On Mondays, the café is slow while everyone is at work. George usually handles days like these by himself while Dream gets the day off, but, well. He seems to have other plans. It's George's first time seeing Dream out of his work clothes — Dream is all soft cotton t-shirts and Florida Gators sweatpants and messy hair, and George thinks he might just die on the spot.

By the door, haloed in early afternoon light, Dream looks incontrovertibly offended. "Wow, George. You're not even going to *try* to sound a little bit more happy to see me?"

"Nope," says George. "What do you want?"

"Coffee pick-up lines," Dream tells him smugly. "Wanna hear them?"

"No," George answers immediately, but it's too late.

Dream sounds like he's just barely holding back a laugh when he launches in with, "Don't roast me, but I can't stop thinking about you."

"Oh my God."

"Is it just me, or is there something brewing between us?" Dream asks, leaning a little bit further over the counter.

George looks over at the couple sitting in the corner of the café, sipping on their macchiatos, and says, "If there weren't people in the store right now. I would — *absolutely* deck you."

“You love it,” Dream counters, and maybe George does when he watches Dream’s green eyes flick up to the big chalkboard menu above the espresso machine. “Can I get a small hot chocolate?”

George raises an eyebrow, turns to grab the hot chocolate powder. “No coffee?”

“I don’t like coffee.”

“You work at a coffee shop and you don’t like coffee?” George asks incredulously.

“It’s too bitter and heavy,” Dream says, scrunching up his nose. “I mean — I only make the coffee, I don’t drink it.”

“Why do you work here.”

“Where else am I supposed to use my list of café-themed pick-up lines on cute baristas?”

George splutters, and his face goes hot, and he fumbles with the lid of the hot chocolate powder. “Do you, like, fucking Google these or something?”

“I spent the entirety of last night looking them up, actually. Did you know there are full websites dedicated to listing pick-up lines?” Dream’s practically halfway leaning over the counter now, looking much too proud of himself for someone who spends his Sunday nights reading about how to flirt.

He’s too much sometimes, George thinks — too flirty, too tall, too confident, too fucking hot in the way that makes George want to scream. Too good at pissing George off in the middle of a perfectly respectable Monday afternoon, too cute when he’s watching George steam milk from the other side of the baked goods showcase.

“I’m spitting in your hot chocolate,” George announces, unprompted.

As the heat swells hotter and hotter, more customers come rushing inside Common Grounds seeking refuge. They slot themselves in the long, winding line in front of the cash register to order iced teas and iced lattes and iced americanos. Hot drinks are a rarity in the summer; George spends more time scooping ice into large plastic cups than he does brewing coffee.

And it’s fine! He can handle it. Dream is on the cash register, and George can overhear the way he’s flirting with the customers. It just makes his blood bubble a bit when Dream tells someone that he “likes them a latte”, though. George has heard that one from him hundreds of times at this point — reusing it is just lazy.

“Did you Google that one too,” George says, loud over the sound of the running sink.

Counting nickels out of the cash register, Dream yells back, “I would’ve used that one on you, George, but you seem busy.”

It becomes an issue when the line of drink orders Dream’s lined up for him on the counter is, well — too much for George to handle. He’s sweating from the heat of the steamed milk, and he’s spilling puddles of almond milk on the floor that he just doesn’t have the time to clean up. George sneaks a glance over his shoulder at one point, and sees that the line in front of the register is

completely empty. Everyone's waiting on him; it makes him sweat a little bit harder.

A shadow falls over his vision of the whipped cream can, and George doesn't even need to turn to see who it is.

"I'm helping you," Dream says, like it's a fact. Something obvious.

George makes a perfect swirl of whipped cream on top of somebody's mocha and reaches up to grab a domed lid. "Someone has to watch the register."

But instead of his hand landing on the smooth plastic, it lands on top of Dream's sun-kissed hands instead. George pulls away like he's been burnt; maybe because the warm tingling crawling up his spine makes him feel like he was.

Before he can do anything else, Dream snaps the lid onto the cup for him. "There's no one at the register, and there hasn't been for a minute now. I'm helping you."

The trail of drink orders on the counter reaches all the way from the espresso machine to the sink, and over the counter, people are tapping their foot on the floor out of pure impatience. George sighs; he's stubborn and he's far too confident and he can hold a grudge, but he knows better than to refuse help.

"Okay," he says slowly, taking a breath. "Okay. Just don't fuck up the coffee again."

Dream grins something bright and wide and beautiful.

They start off clunky, as all reluctant partnerships do. Dream's limbs are too long, and it's easy for him to knock over George's coffees with the accidental nudge of an elbow, the movement of his hand when he goes to grab the bottle of caramel. The limited counter space doesn't make it any better, and they bicker over who has more room in hissed remarks between taking turns pulling shots of espresso.

"Who's hotter," asks Dream, "me or the coffee?"

George stops mid-pour and stares something fiery at Dream for a long, long while.

Eventually, it gets easier, and they fall into a rhythm of scooping ice and pouring coffee and measuring out splashes of oat milk. George lightly pushes his finished drinks across the counter, and wordlessly, Dream takes them to pass to the customers. They work in tandem, flowing together like the freshly brewed espresso that trickles out of the machine, and it just *clicks*.

"Don't tamp too hard," George tells him for the umpteenth time.

"Shut up," Dream says just as easily, and he presses the tamper down onto the ground coffee.

They extract espresso and whisk matcha and measure out sweetener until the number of customers waiting for their drinks goes down, down, down. George says, "Woah," out loud when he goes to grab the next drink order and sees, well — nothing. The counter is clear. There's no one at the register, no one for Dream to use a bad coffee-themed pick-up line on to try and flirt his way into extra tips.

George turns around to Dream wiping a bit of spilt guava juice off of the counter. When Dream looks up, he blows the blond strands of hair out of his face — as if he couldn't get any hotter! — and he leans against the smooth granite with a steady hand, smiles his cocky little smile. "Told you I could do it," he says.

“You’re the worst,” George tells him, arms crossed.

This time, though, he means it a little less than usual. Dream laughs, and when it makes George feel light and airy all over, he wonders if Dream knows.

Closing the café always feels relieving, in a way. It’s the end of the day, and a promise that when George gets home, he gets to eat dinner in front of the television. Pet his cat. Play a round of CS:GO, maybe, if he’s feeling up to it.

“Your coffee didn’t suck today,” George says. It’s almost a compliment — emphasis on *almost*.

Dream huffs. “Thank you,” he replies, teasingly. “Your insults really hit hard today.”

“No one complained about the espresso tasting burnt,” George remarks.

“Like you said,” Dream says, “don’t tamp the coffee too hard.”

George grins, leans on his broom, and watches Dream wipe the counters from over the baked good showcase. It’s easier between them now. More relaxed. Lighthearted insults fall from George’s lips as quickly as Dream’s can catch up.

The front door is locked, the potted plants are watered, and the floors are swept clean. Dream’s knees knock against George’s as the two clamber to grab their backpacks from the back room, and when they shut off the lights for the night and jog down the steps of the back door, the sun is tucking itself to bed behind the horizon. The sky is painted orange and pink and blazing gold, and although George can’t exactly appreciate the colours, he knows it matches Dream’s golden skin and the permanent rosy flush at the tips of his ears.

“So, uh, I’ll see you tomorrow,” George says, brushing brown waves out of his eyes. He turns on his heel to walk off to the bus station (he still can’t drive after all these years living in America), but then —

“You should get in my car,” Dream says.

George laughs, bright and clear in the quiet sunset sky. “What?”

“Okay, I didn’t mean for it to come out like *that*,” Dream manages between laughs, and he’s wheezing like the sound of the steam wand they use to froth up hot milk. “I meant, like, I can drive you home. If you want.”

It’s the first time George has heard Dream laugh. Really, truly, deeply laugh, and it makes George feel warm to the apples of his cheeks. Dream’s laugh is the kind that’s stupid and a little bit terrifying. It’s the kind that George wants to hear again, and the kind that makes George do stupid things, like getting in the car of the one coworker he can’t fucking stand.

He settles himself into the passenger seat of Dream’s car, tucks his backpack between his legs to ground him. Dream tosses his bag in the back and twirls his keychain once, twice around his finger before starting the car. A smiley face pendant hangs from the keyring, and when the engine hums to life George wonders idly if it’s what inspired the smiley face on Dream’s name tag.

George types his address into Dream's phone and lets Google Maps do the rest. When Dream pulls out of the parking lot, George does what he does best: be nosy.

Dream's car is unmistakably his. There's a squishy foam cloud hanging from his rearview mirror in lieu of dice, and the centre console has Dream's favourite flavour of mint gum and a tube of hand lotion for when his hands get dry after constantly washing them at work. A muffin wrapper sits in the cup holder, and he's got one of those little air fresheners clipped to his car air vents.

"What are you doing," Dream says. His eyes are on the road, but George knows that he can see him from the corner of his vision.

"Snooping."

"You're making a mess."

"I know."

The ride is quiet — not out of bitterness or anger, George thinks, but out of the scariness of something insurmountably new. And when he gets out of the car with a "thank you" and a "see you tomorrow", Dream beams at him through the tinted glass of the passenger side window. It's all bright teeth and pink lips and the stubble that scratches across Dream's jawline, and George fucking hates the way he wants to stare at it forever.

It becomes a daily thing: Dream offers to drive George to and from work, and the two bicker over the aux cord in the parking lot until one of them finally gives up. Dream likes to pick one artist on Spotify to listen to when he plays his music; George likes to put all his liked songs from Youtube Music on shuffle. Dream thinks using Youtube Music should be considered a cardinal sin. George retorts that being named Dream should be considered as worse.

"No way, dude. You like him," Sapnap says one day over the counter.

George nearly bursts out laughing. "I can hate him and think he's hot at the same time, idiot."

"You don't hate him, though." Sapnap flicks a straw wrapper across the granite counter. "At least not anymore. Now you just think he's hot," he snickers.

"Nope," George replies, and he flicks the wrapper back.

The thing is — Dream has always been attractive, even before George even realized it. He's cute when he smiles so hard at customers that it reaches his eyes, and he's cute when he tilts his head in amusement after George curses under his breath after he messes up a drink. Hating Dream didn't start until his hotness started to be a problem for George, and didn't *really* have time to settle in until he'd launched a puck of dry coffee grounds into George's face. George still hates him — he just hates him differently now, in the way that they went from arguing over espressos and counter space to arguing over the best Travis Scott song. It's just the way things are.

Sapnap plucks the straw wrapper off of the counter. "You got jealous when he flirted with the customers," he says, rolling it up into a tight paper ball. "He drives you home from work every day he can and you argue like — like a married couple!"

George makes a face of bitter distaste and laughs at the sheer ridiculousness of it all. “I think you’re reading this wrong.”

“No, dumbass,” says Sapnap, and the paper wrapper goes flying through the air to hit George right between the eyes. “You’re the one reading it wrong.”

George is a hundred percent, undoubtedly sure that he’s not the one reading this wrong.

“What d’you wanna listen to?” Dream asks him in the car, voice slurred with the thickness that comes only with early mornings. It’s terribly, terribly attractive.

George frowns and slams the door shut behind him, tossing his bag in the backseat. “You’re letting me pick?”

“Well, yeah,” Dream says, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. “I picked last time.”

“I didn’t realize we were taking turns now,” George comments. He eyes the muffin sitting in the cup holder, and Dream doesn’t even flinch when he breaks off a piece to shove in his mouth. “But, uh, yeah. Just turn on the radio, or something.”

“Radio sucks,” Dream voices, but he grins and reaches over to turn it on anyway. He’s like that now — does anything George asks.

He reverses out of his parking spot with a hand on the back of George’s headrest, and a little piece inside George, right in the part of his brain where he’s sure that he doesn’t like Dream, cracks.

It goes like that for days, weeks. George lets Dream handle the drinks while he mans the register, and when he’s not serving customers, he’s turned around, staring at long legs and messy dirty blond hair. George rewrites his name tag to say *George :]* again, and thinks that the smileys next to each other look nice.

“Why are you —” Dream splutters, one day, “like, *staring* at me?”

“Uh. Making sure you’re, like, doing it right,” George manages to say.

Dream can handle everything now, though. His latte art is near perfect, and when George smells the espresso he’s brewed, it’s warm and good. And, well. Dream is warm and good too. George hates it.

“I have a double shot espresso,” Dream says, and when he passes the drink over the customer, it’s with a smile and a fucking *wink*. The customer nearly melts right there on the spot, but Dream’s already turned around to make the next drink.

And George — George doesn’t know why, but it unfurls something bitter and ugly in his chest. Every time he sees Dream charm the customers with sleazy grins and tousled blond hair, George feels a little bit worse. It was annoyance, at first, when Dream would toss pick-up lines and easy remarks over his shoulder like it was nothing. Now, though. It burns George from the inside out instead of tending to his flame, instead of making him want to explode.

Because, George realizes now — Sapnap was right. He likes him. He really, really fucking likes

him, and it hurts. He hates that he likes Dream, hates that he wants to run his fingertips across sunkissed skin and wants to hold his warm hands, because Dream flirts with everybody. Dream can't, doesn't, won't ever like him back. It hurts. It's cruel, and George wants to quit his job and never come back, because how did he manage to start liking the coworker who spills coffee grounds on him, who's far too flirty for anyone's good?

George isn't sure what feels worse — a coworker he hates, or a coworker he has a little (or, a lot) of a crush on.

Slow days at the café are all quiet jazz, slotting the silence between Dream and George.

George watches Dream's warm, deft hands flying over the counter. He's getting better. The temperature of his steamed milk, the even pressure he applies to the coffee tamper. Even for George, he can admit that Dream's skills are better than before.

"Could you make me a double shot latte?" George blurts, after Dream wipes the portafilter clean. "Uh, small."

"Sure," Dream says, turning on the coffee grinder.

It's so relaxed: the lazy golden light falling past the windows, the running water of Common Grounds' sink. George doesn't want coffee to keep himself awake — his mind's already working overtime, trying to push away thoughts of cotton tees and Gators sweatpants and the scratch of stubble against his cheek.

In a ceramic mug with a little painted cat on it — Dream had bought it for George from the thrift shop across the café — there's caramel-coloured coffee and a pretty little foam heart on top. Dream slides it over the counter, and it warms George from the tips of his fingers when he grasps the mug with gentle hands.

"I'm practicing my latte art," Dream tells him. "To impress the pretty barista."

George looks at Dream from over the cup as he brings it to his lips — the coffee is hot and rich and smooth and sweet and everything a latte should be. The heat of the coffee clings to his tongue like film, and the steamed, foamy milk balances it out with a tinge of creamy sweetness.

A confident smile plays across Dream's lips. "Good?"

"Good," George says, coughing a little when he remembers that *Dream just called him pretty*. "Where'd you learn to make espresso like that?"

"I learned from the best." Dream grins, leaning against the counter like he's at home here. "It's all you. You're like, some type of coffee connoisseur or something."

"I just know the difference between good and bad coffee because I'm willing to drink it," George tosses back, "unlike you."

"It's not my fault I think people who drink coffee are gross," Dream teases, playing idly with the towel in his hands. "I mean, I think I can make an exception for you, though."

“Shut up,” George mumbles. His face — his blush — is hidden in the steam of the coffee mug.

“What’s another one,” Dream wonders aloud, “oh! If the coffee isn’t hot enough, I could hold it for you for a while.”

It’s terrible. It’s absolutely terrible, and it’s not a good pick-up line at all, and George — George feels fucking furious, because he’s gone all red and there are people in the store and he can feel their stares — so George takes Dream’s hand, loops his fingers around his wrist, and pulls him away.

“What the —” Dream exclaims.

George drags him all the way outside, behind the counter and out the back door. The door slams shut behind them, and when George inhales the fresh air outside, he drops Dream’s hand. It’s hot, too hot, and it’s stuffy and suffocating.

“What the hell! George, what are you doing?” Dream shrills, whirling around to meet his eyes.

George crosses his arms. “You can’t keep doing that!”

“What?” Dream scoffs.

George nearly screams. “Are you fucking serious?”

“Is this about the spilled coffee again?” Dream asks. He has no idea what George is talking about — and that’s the worst fucking part.

“No, God,” George groans, driving the heels of his palms into his eyes. “You — you flirt with me and drive me to work and then you turn around and then you turn around and use your stupid — pick-up lines on the customers?”

Dream steps forward. “George,” he starts.

“God — just — just stop! With your stupid puns, and your flirting, and your — your *you!*”

“George —”

George wants to cry. His vision goes a little blurry; he already knows it’s from the tears dewing his eyelashes. “You can’t keep playing with my — with people’s feelings like that!”

Something akin to hurt flashes across Dream’s face, and it’s painful and it makes George’s heart twist a little inside his chest like something insidious. “George, I’m not —”

“You fucking suck,” George hisses, punctuating each word with a stab of his finger in the centre of Dream’s chest. “You come in here and you get hired and you turn my fucking life upside down, and I can’t even look at the espresso machine without *thinking* about you —”

Dream cuts him off; the whites of his eyes are starting to go red and glossy. “I’m not — I’m not fucking *playing with your feelings!*” he exclaims, face red-hot. “You’re cute. And I like you, and I’ve liked you for a while now and I thought you liked me back, because you bicker with me and you let me drive you home, but, well. I guess you don’t, and that’s okay, but —”

Holy shit.

“Shut up,” George breathes.

The air outside goes perfectly still, like it'll shatter if George moves too fast. Maybe it will. Maybe George wants it to.

“What? I don't —”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up,” George rushes out, and he kisses him.

Kissing Dream feels like everything and nothing all at once. Dream is lazy afternoons and the taste of sweet chocolate, Dream is confident grins and tilted heads and arguing over the noise of the coffee grinder, and to George, kissing him with the sunset sky over their heads is all so easy that it feels natural. The neckline of Dream's shirt is soft when George tugs on it to pull Dream closer; the blond hair that tickles George's nose and the feeling of lips against his feels softer.

George's insides feel as hot as molten lava, as hot as the rich espresso that runs through his veins, because he and Dream are kissing. They're in the parking lot and they're kissing and there are customers alone in the café, and it doesn't feel fucking real, but it is. It's as real as the gentle grasp of Dream's hands on George's hips, the concrete ground under their feet.

Dream presses their chests flush together, cradling George's face like he'll fall apart in his very hands, and despite it all — George laughs wetly. Dream pulls away, and there's worry in those glossy green eyes of his. He wipes away the beginnings of tears underneath George's eyes with the pad of his thumb.

“Are you okay?”

There's a pause, a sniffle. “I'm okay,” George tells him, and it's the truth. He's more than okay. “I'm just — it's just funny. This is funny.”

A slow, sure smile stretches across Dream's face, and George watches the way the freckles on his cheeks stretch with him. “It is a little funny,” he murmurs, pressing another kiss to the corner of George's mouth, and George isn't really sure what he's done to deserve this. “You're funny. You taste like coffee.”

George plays with the wrinkled bit of Dream's t-shirt, pressing a palm over the warmth of his chest. Dream's heart is beating hard and fast underneath. “You're such an idiot,” George tells him fondly, and they both giggle. “Is it good coffee, at least?”

“Really fucking good coffee,” Dream breathes, swooping down for another kiss.

End Notes

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